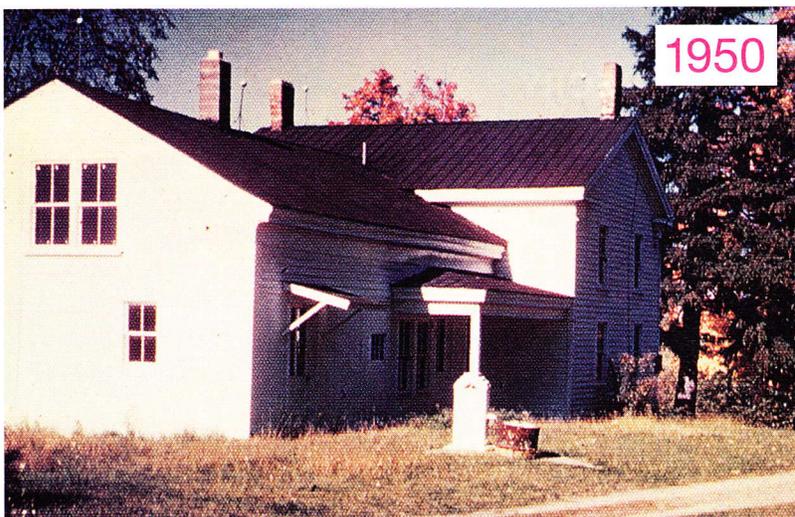


2001

My Back-to-the-Future

Farmhouse

They say every person has a twin somewhere; maybe, but I know that it's true for houses By Marya Smith



1950

Is there a Cupid for people and houses? I think so. When we bought our Illinois farmhouse for a weekend retreat, it was covered with cheap gray siding and topped by a roof of peeling silver paint. The inside was as rough and barren of charm as a seedy bar-room. But it was love at first sight, and it ignited a passion for weekend restoration projects.

Why did I adore this dilapidated house and feel so strongly that my children must experience its (then invisible) magic? It has taken me years to discover the *(continued)*

FARMHOUSE *Continued*

answer. Initially, when baffled friends and relatives asked about its appeal, I'd explain that I wanted my son and daughter, then ages 12 and 9, to experience the joys of country life. I wanted them to go sledding down a nearby hill. I wanted them to play in the hayloft of the faded red barn and to know the delicious, musty smell that only years of mingled animals, manure and feed can create. I wanted the pleasures of the outdoors to be as accessible and routine for them as they had been for me at their ages, while I was growing up on a grape farm in the Finger Lakes of New York State.

But the truth was that I felt a powerful pull toward the place. I experienced a profound sense of

Seeing double? The similarity between the author's 1860s restored farmhouse (right) and her grandfather's childhood home (previous page) is uncanny.



This house embodies a sweet childhood memory. It brings an old love back to life, and in that sense, we have a lifelong romance

belonging whenever I was there, even as I worked hard to eradicate the unsightly “improvements” of previous owners.

Every weekend, my husband, children, friends and I would drive the 150 miles from our Oak Park home to the farmhouse. Once we arrived, the kids would play games—some invented, some standard fare like hide-and-seek and old maid—that they rarely had time for back home.

I was thankful for their games, because for the first four years my weekends were focused on renovating the circa 1860 house. I surfaced only to prepare meals and to relax in the evenings by playing Scrabble and Kick the Can.

In every room of the (thankfully small) farmhouse, I slowly but surely removed loud, ugly wallpaper from the walls and stripped wood moldings of paint and dark varnish. I pulled up layers of ancient linoleum to discover wide pine floors, and battled with glue-drenched contact paper to uncover wainscoting. My husband helped me yank off the paperlike tiles of a false ceiling to reveal the kitchen's original beaded one.

I never actually thought of my work as a renovation project. It was just a series of small, satisfying steps, each one leading the house back to the honest, simple good looks I intuitively sensed were there. The pleasure of each discovery kept me going.

One especially exciting find happened when my daughter, Sarah, then 10, was helping me in the living room. She screeched with delight when she pulled off a strip of wallpaper and uncovered an inscription in the middle of the wall: “Plaster by Otto Grebner, Oct. 6, 1903.” We were thrilled to find evidence that corroborated our own hunches about when the front part of the house had been added on to the earlier log cabin section (now the kitchen). “I feel like an archaeologist,” Sarah said proudly.

Now the restoration is finished, and a comfortable, homey farmhouse is the result. Friends, especially the ones who witnessed its seemingly unpromising beginnings, often ask me how I knew it would look this way. Until recently, I wasn't sure myself. Then I chanced upon an old color photo from the 1940s and realized that I have known this house all my life.

The photo, from a family album, is of my childhood home, but it was taken long before I *(continued)*

FARMHOUSE

Continued

lived there. My grandfather was born there, but he had the house expanded and remodeled extensively before our parents moved the nine of us children there in the early 1950s, when I was 7.

The photo shows a simple white clapboard house with a black roof and a pump not far from the kitchen door. Searching my memory, I realize I saw this precursor to my childhood home at least a few times, because when I was very young, we occasionally went there to pick raspberries. But the little farmhouse was closed up, so we couldn't go inside.

It is the expanded farmhouse that I always assumed held the heart of my childhood memories. Now I know that my deepest memories were somehow forged in my early visions of the original building.

Placing the photo of the farmhouse

in its original state beside a photo of my adult weekend home in its restored state took my breath away. Here was my true love. The similarity is so uncanny that people who look at both photos, side by side, assume they are of the same house. The white clapboard exterior and black roof are identical on both houses. Even the pump is in the same place (although it was removed from my parents' home before we moved in).

This old house is my old house. At least it feels that way. It is only now that I am beginning to understand why the unassuming farmhouse resonated so powerfully for me from the first day I saw it. I know why it seemed so essential that my children experience its modest beauty. For we had been friends all my life, this house and I.

And as for the house, I believe it had been waiting there patiently, all these years, knowing I would find it. ■

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